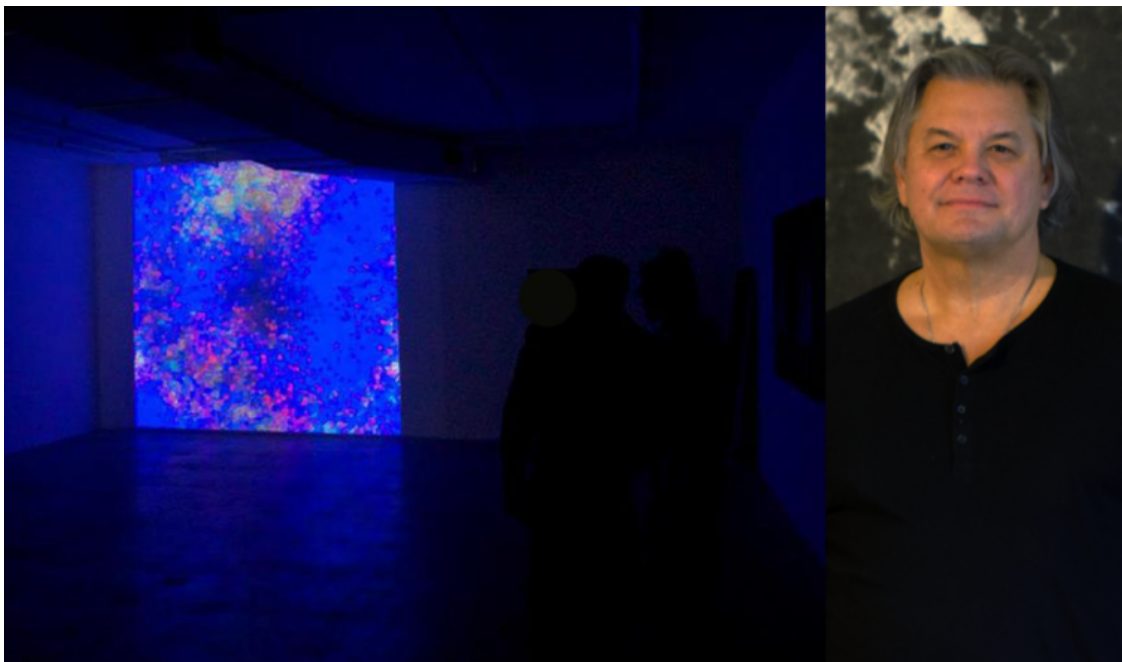


# *Digital, Viral, Magical: A Conversation with Joseph Nechvatal*

Joseph Nechvatal and Jonathan P. Eburne



Published online on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023 at ASAP/Journal, the scholarly publication of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, here <https://asapjournal.com/digital-viral-magical-a-conversation-with-joseph-nechvatal-joseph-nechvatal-and-jonathan-p-eburne/> Like the association and print journal it serves, ASAP/J explores new developments in a variety of post-1960 arts, including writing, plastic and visual arts, digital arts, music and sound art, performance, architecture and design, mixed media and intermedia arts.



*Viral Venture* (2009) animation | Joseph Nechvatal

How quaint, how positively old-fashioned, the Zoom interview now feels. Nearly four years after the COVID-19 pandemic established it as a standard medium for wireless communication, I have long since lost count of the online course sessions, meetings, and so many other forms of institutional, creative, and family communication that have passed through it. Unsurprisingly, my conversation with the Paris-based, American transdisciplinary artist Joseph Nechvatal also took place via Zoom. At Joseph's request, however, we kept the video turned off. Reduced to a mechanism of sonic transmission—as well, I should mention, as a convenient recording device—the retro-futurist allure of online videoconferencing gave way to the feeble,

tinny sound quality of computer audio. So too did this restricted interface retain all the glitches, freezes, and interferences we'd come to expect from digital communication. For this very reason, ironically, it felt like we were talking through transistor radios. And this was delightful.

All this sonic interference chimes, in turn, with the key procedural and conceptual touchstones of Nechvatal's body of artistic work. With a career spanning five decades, Nechvatal is a trans-media artist whose work explores the interfaces between the technological and the biological—the digital and the corporeal. He creates paintings, animations and sound works by deploying C++ homemade computer viruses and visual noise interferences to erode and transform images and sounds—exploring the contours of artificial life through the calculated introduction of chaos. His artwork is, in this regard, an immersive art of noise; understood as a “disturbing, sensorially reverberating, compound unified field” that can “block, distort, or change the meaning of a message in both human and electronic communication.”<sup>1</sup> As a researcher and critic—as well as throughout his artistic work—Nechvatal is attentive to the ambivalences of such disturbances: like viruses themselves, they can destroy as well as create. Approached through the lens of artistic and cultural practice, however, the disturbances of noise are, above all, a call to consciousness. As he explains in his 2011 book *Immersion into Noise*, “What was once negating and exterior now fuels the inner artistic imagination. But for noise to be first noise, it must destabilize us. It must initially jar. It must challenge. It must initiate a glitch of psychic crumbling.”<sup>2</sup> Nechvatal is describing noise music here, but the insight applies more broadly to his explorations of technological interference, viral (de)composition, and the exploration of artificial life: what resounds through all the noise, he insists, is the call to “inner artistic imagination” and self-awareness.

Nechvatal's computer-robotic assisted paintings and software animations bear out the artist's claim that “the creative art of noise draws us closer to our inner world, to the life of our imagination with its intense drives, suspicions, fears, and loves.”<sup>3</sup> Just as the restricted use of Zoom in our conversation focused our mutual attention on the intimacies of voice, Nechvatal's writing argues for a creative art of noise that fosters *inner* perception. This inner perception is where it's at: on a planet that continues to be overrun by systems of technological connectedness, noise can

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion into Noise*, second edition. Open University Press, 2011/2021; 17.  
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/9618970.0001.001/1:2/--immersion-into-noise?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

<sup>2</sup> Nechvatal, *Immersion into Noise*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Nechvatal, “Preface,” *Immersion into Noise*; 11.

break and re-connect our self-perception in distinctive and productive ways. “Our inner world is the only real source of meaning and purpose we have,” he writes, concluding that “a participatory, political visionary art of noise is the way to discover this inner life for ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

What follows is an edited transcription of a conversation recorded in the winter of 2022. I had never met Joseph prior to this conversation, having only corresponded with him briefly via email. The artistic noisiness of a video-less Zoom call thus established the very conditions of our interaction, and engagement which—like the artist himself—was warm, intimate, and committed to the benevolent magic of a conscious effort to introduce positive energy into the world.

—Jonathan P. Eburne

JE: This should work; can you hear me okay?

JN: I hear you fine. You read me?

JE: I can indeed, and so I'll just balance that there, okay...

JN: Testing... testing...

JE: This seems dandy, yeah?

JN: Treble... bass...

JE: Yeah my, er, equalizer—I've just got to turn some knobs here...

JN: You know, I was in a rock band, so I'm familiar with this sound check procedure.

JE: Were you now! I'm not surprised by that, yet by the same token, I have to ask, what did you—

JN: Well, it was in high school.

JE: Aha! Well, I wasn't, which is about all you need to know about what I was like in high school.

JN: Wait, Jonathan, you're breaking up when you just spoke like that.

JE: Okay, how about now?

JN: It's very tinny—a little breaking up—but okay! Did you move your head or something?

JE: Nothing moved; maybe that was just the affective charge of thinking about high school.

JN: It does sound like music coming off a little tinny speaker on a radio driving around at midnight after the high school dance.

JE: That is the sound image to keep in our minds. So to start us off: you live in Paris full-time, yes?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

JN: Yes, I do now. It was kind of a long, drawn-out process. I came here in 1995—not France, but Paris—as an artist-in-residence and from there I joined a PhD program at the University of Wales, Newport in Wales under Roy Ascott and received a grant from the European Community with the proviso that I continued to live in Europe somewhere. I had a friend in Paris, Maja, who lent me her apartment so I was able to first establish myself in 1995-96-97 here while I was working on the PhD—all the while having kept my apartment in New York on the Lower East Side. On a street called Ludlow Street—a very inexpensive, wonderful, cheap apartment, at the time, that I had since 1980. When I got my doctorate in the philosophy of art and new technology in 1999 I started to split my life in two: six months here in Paris, six months in New York. That year I also married a French woman, Marie-Claude, and I started to teach at the MFA department at the School of Visual Arts in New York. We established a real solid rhythm of half-half that went on for a good twelve years. Then one day I received a letter from my landlord saying he was going to refuse to honor the lease for my apartment on Ludlow Street. They sold the building and I was basically gentrified out of the city. At that point we decided it was more practical just to move the studio and everything here in Paris—after donating my archive to The Fales Library Downtown Collection at the NYU Special Collections Library. So yes, for the last eight or nine years I've been in Paris more or less full-time.

You know, life doesn't always come out the way you imagined it would. Sometimes it's necessity that drives you into other better places.



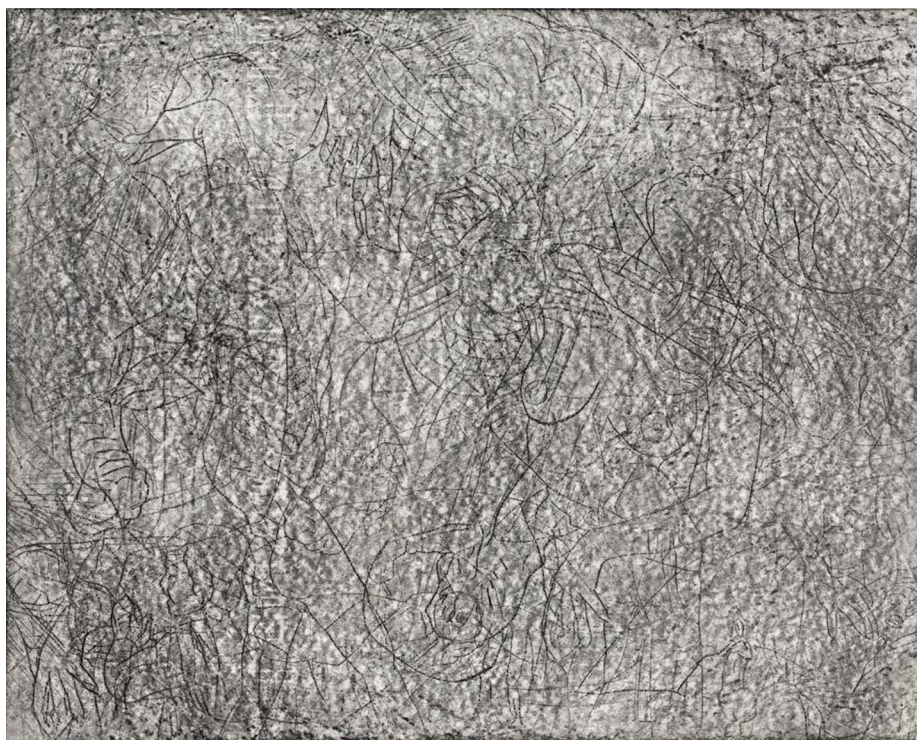


Figure 1. *Uplifting* (1983)



Figure 2. *Barbarian Demonology* (1984)

JE: Perhaps it's the same with projects, too. This is not what we were sitting down to talk about per se, but I live in a place I once thought of, when I got here, as the middle of nowhere, and yet which has actually become far more interesting than I had ever thought possible. It has involved resisting the idea that life happens elsewhere: that that you have to go to New York to see art, or that all the real artists live somewhere far away—and certainly far away from central Pennsylvania—and instead actually to start looking around and seeing who actually is here and doing exciting work and who might actually benefit from, you know, a little hand here and there. That's been pretty life-changing.

JN: When the internet established itself as a solid medium, the whole idea of the A1 city that was the only place to be for art communication to occur—for artists to experiment together, and to make friends and enemies—that's sort of now gone. It is now dispersed throughout the entire net world. Like everything else, place became decentralized. You were probably quite aware of that. Look, we're talking from across the ocean—we just cyber networked—and that's just the way life goes now. There are no frontiers in that respect.

JE: In that respect. But it's bolstered, if anything, by gentrification, or redoubled. I hardly wish to give gentrification a positive aspect, but the idea that a lot of artists who might previously have had studios and/or apartments in Brooklyn or the Bronx now live in the Hudson River Valley, which has now become too expensive for anybody to live in in turn. So that dispersal happening on account of gentrification is consolidated through connectivity. And whereas that connectivity is also monetized and bears its own kinds of gentrification, I must say that the desperation of trying to survive intellectually via Zoom has been pretty incredible. I've met more people that way in the past three years than I would ever have done otherwise. So you're absolutely right. There's still a craving for contact, but it's also easy to manufacture that, too. You can start a poetry workshop with just a handful of folks, and just do stuff—so it's not like you need to be in an art center for that.



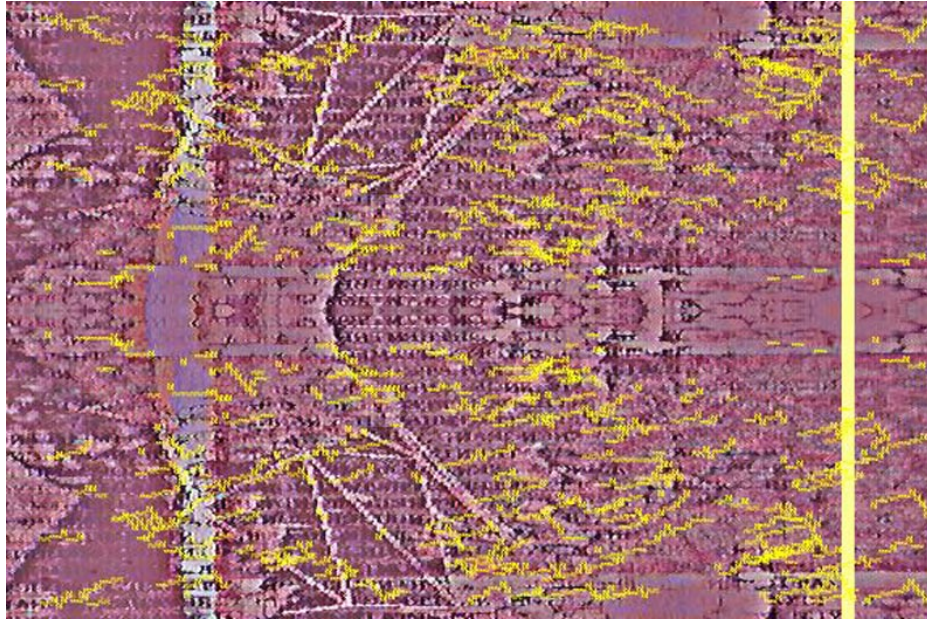


Figure 3. *viral attaque: transmissioN* (1993)



Figure 4. *vOluptuary drOid décOlletage* (2002)

JN: Which is basically the same experience I had on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 80s. I mean, okay, you're in the middle of this big, bustling city, but you're really just in a little community of people that you're getting to know and their friends. Downtown felt like a relatively

small community packed with people interested in No Wave music and experimental art and things. It wasn't like a big scene. And it certainly wasn't an international industry—as the art world became—so marvelous small things could happen.

JE: I'm really struck by this because you are, in ways I really identify with, a student of the avant-garde—and I mean that not in the singular, as if there were only one avant-garde. What I mean is that you are invested in the histories and dynamisms and, let's say, the living cultures of experimentalism through the decades. And one of the great myths that is unbelievably hard to relinquish—even in oneself, but especially in conversation—is the sense in which an avant-garde describes some sort of ready-made cultural formation. You were either there at the time or you missed out. And they're exactly not that. I mean, there's no Baedeker for who's who when you're gathering together a handful of people on your block.

JN: For me, the benefit of our historical passion—I guess I have passion for the historical avant-garde, absolutely—is that you find your community through your ancestors. It's a bit like tribal culture: one honors a certain set of ancestors, and then you see other people that respond to those ghosts—those ancestors—and you communicate with them. They're your people. You find your people. But you can also become academic—which I think is the pitfall of that historical passion—but that can be quite easily avoided because there's always more to find out. There are more things and people to discover—such as other minor artists in the major movements—and there's all kinds of nuance there to explore.

JE: It is a bit like the high school band scenario: you form affinities through a combinatory logic of happenstance—in other words, based on who's around—and you also form affinities through shared precursors—that is, affinities of taste. Such as: what's your repertoire? Oh, I'm really into this. Oh, me too; let's play together. Okay great. Let's kick out the bass player because they're really into different bands.



Figure 5. *Orgiastic abattOir flawless ignudiO* (2003)

JN: In our case—with my rock band at Hinsdale High School—we all loved the first Rolling Stones albums. We were growing up outside of Chicago and the Stones happened to be playing basically Chicago blues. Some songs were literally the Chicago blues. Yet the Stones were all very swinging London hip—and the music was rather easy to play. Songs like *Satisfaction*, *Susie Q*, *Not Fade Away* and *It's All Over Now* are rather simple songs to learn. And we were lucky: we had a guy named Dave Kent who could sound like Mick Jagger. He even could move kind of like him. He was very lean and tall, so all of a sudden we had this little copy band in which I played the drums and sang backup. It was a wonderful youthful experience drumming *Not Fade Away*.

JE: Having already induced you to make the connection, I can't help but find certain continuities between the way you just narrated that band experience—I wouldn't say it was modest; I would say that it was procedural—and the work that you do today. Which is to say: there's something fundamentally *non*-abstract about your viral compositions, whether in animation or in sound. I won't say they're handmade, because they're literally not that, but there is a meticulousness to your work—an at-hand quality—that strikes me as rooted in a sensibility similar to what you just described.

JN: The way I hear your question is: there is a kind of vibrational intensity in what I do. There's a kind of complexity in what I do that usually has to do with a figurative aspect. I'm talking both about my visual art—the two-dimensional, still, computer-robotic paintings—and the moving animations and/or the audio art work. Usually there is a figurative voice—or a figurative presence—that is then overwhelmed by the ground. The figure/ground separation is collapsing—or has collapsed. That is kind of what happens in rock music too, because you sing the lyrics within the din of the drums and the electric guitar and bass and tambourine that may verge on overwhelming them, often. The sound makes an obscuring envelope around the delivery of the lyrics—so there is a tension between the intensity of the ground and, let's say, the clarity of the figurative or narrative element.

JE: I have a question about precisely this: about how your writing, like your animations and compositions, does indeed proceed from figures, as you just said. I was struck by the fact that your writings are often about certain conceptual figures, certain artists, certain works, certain histories of experimental sound and art. For instance, you take up the Lascaux cave paintings, Christian iconography, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> In a moment I would like to ask you about the dynamics of “overwhelming”—as you just described it—but I would like to start from the reverse angle and ask about the figures, and the most recent figures in particular, such as the Andrew Deutsch collaboration on *Orlando*. I'm interested in this anonymous reading of *Orlando*—you call it a “sonic signature”—and then you also take up Antonin Artaud in your *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* *Viral Symphony Plague*, where you talk about Artaud's sonic signature as a figure for that work.<sup>6</sup> Could you say more about that procedure from the figural? So much of your work is about what happens next, but I'd love to talk about your investment in those figures. How do you think through *Orlando*? And likewise Artaud? I'm especially interested in *Orlando* and in Virginia Woolf as interlocutors.

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<sup>5</sup> See esp. Joseph Nechvatal, “Nerve Noise Visualization in the Grotte de Lascaux,” from Chapter 2 of *Immersion into Noise*. University of Michigan Library, 2011.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/9618970.0001.001/1:5/--immersion-into-noise?rgn=div1;view=fulltext#5.2>

<sup>6</sup> See the catalogue notes for Joseph Nechvatal, *The Viral Tempest*: <https://pentiments.org/catalog/pen010/>





Figure 6. *Surveyed Orlando in the Thicket of Shreds* (2019)



Figure 7. *Plagued Orlando Tracking the Viral Storm* (2020)

JN: I'll be specific about the *Orlando* project. But the greater background is that I'm very attracted to a palimpsest approach to signal imagery—which is, again, a kind of signature of lost time and of ancestry. Of old times remembered poorly or selectively. And so in my work there's usually a buildup of figurative elements in conflict. That began in the early 80s, with drawings where I would superimpose appropriated contour lines from pop magazines and keep piling them on—one on top of the other—into an apocalyptic death scene. That excessive pile-on sort of set my aesthetic preference. Most everyone else was doing either neo-pop or post-modern minimal abstraction at the time. Both of those are very clear forms of signal communication compared to what I was

doing. I involved myself in a mixture of image creation and image destruction. Both happening at the noisy same time. And as this approach grew through the use of my *Computer Virus Project*—and its usefulness as an art tool in that general aesthetic adventure—the *Orlando* project came calling.<sup>7</sup> I had been working since around 2000 on the hermaphrodite image—an idea I found first through Marcel Duchamp’s interest in Alchemy that led to the bachelor machine, around 1913, that he developed in connection with pieces for the *Large Glass*. The hermaphrodite image fits well with my idea of the power of ambiguity: there is a non-clarity at work here. But perhaps non-binary is a better word for it. I liked that approach for the suggestivity of it—for the liberation of the mind that that way of thinking allows, regardless of identity preference or established identity. *Orlando* was an extension from this hermaphrodite work that began in 2000 with a New York show called *ec-satyricon 2000*. A few years ago I picked up Woolf’s book, *Orlando*, and began reading it—and it seemed like the perfect extension vehicle for my *ec-satyricon 2000* work. But with Woolf you don’t have a metamorphosis—you have a sudden switch that happens without explanation, without imagery description. For *ec-satyricon 2000* and after I was using subtle acts of morphing; but in *Orlando* there’s no such morph. The prince falls asleep—bang—he wakes up a woman. Nothing explained, nothing visualized. That suddenness attracted me because it gave me the free idea to play with a figure from my earlier computer-robotic assisted paintings—that I had been doing since the mid-1980s—Lazarus. You know, the guy who dies and suddenly comes back to life and pops out of his tomb. In the 80s everyone serious had been talking about the death of painting and I thought, well, maybe computer robotics could be the new life for painting—a way for it to come back from the dead. So I started making big paintings using a figure of Lazarus—which I had purchased from one of the Latinx religious-magic shops in my Ludlow Street neighborhood. I bought a three-foot-high sculpture of Lazarus and covered him in Xeroxes of my palimpsest drawings and then started photographing him. Next I started embedding him into the visual noise that I was creating otherwise. I did a whole series of Lazarus-based computer-robotic assisted paintings in the late 1980s, and then I put him away—he died again, or at least went back to a deep sleep. But then my *Computer Virus Project* came to be in the early 90s, and

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<sup>7</sup> On *The Computer Virus Project*, see Stéphane Sikora, “Balancing Art and Complexity: Joseph Nechvatal’s *Computer Virus Project*.”  
<https://www.eyewithwings.net/nechvatal/Balancing/Balancing%20Art%20and%20Complex.htm>



in 2000 my hermaphrodite project came to be within *Computer Virus Project II* work, and lately Orlando came calling. They all were born out of Lazarus, in a way.

It's all a way of looking back into the grave and pulling out ghostly figures and bringing them back to a half-life. It was easy for Lazarus to become Orlando because he was already wearing a tunic, which actually looks like a dress. So all of a sudden the figure in my work had a kind of formal ambiguity that was perfect for the Orlando subject—and I just started playing with it. I started to manipulate Lazarus as Orlando, transforming him/her—attacking the him/her figure with my *Computer Virus Project II* software. Shredding it. I perform a lot of shredding now with my viral artificial-life software and that's how Orlando came to be—as a shredded or shredding extenuation of my dead Lazarus come back to life. So the project is about viral generation and regeneration.

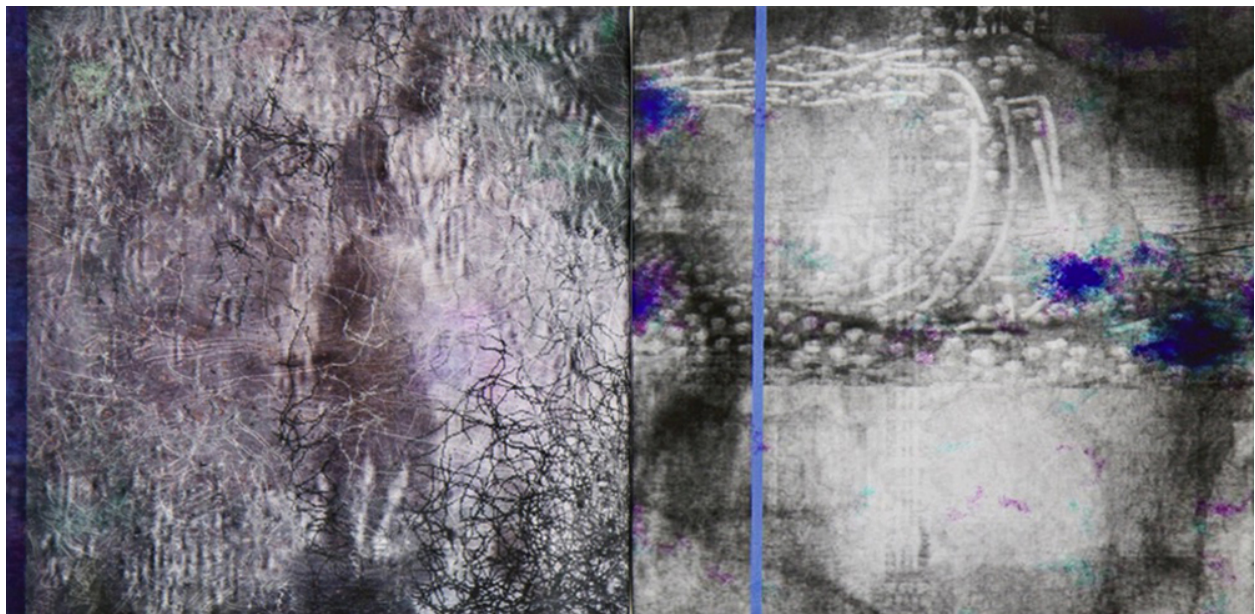


Figure 8. *Orlando the Oracle of Thorns* (2020)

JE: As you were talking about generation and regeneration, it occurred to me that the idea you brought up before about ancestors is present here too. Lazarus has seen death, and he's come back with that knowledge—the knowledge of ancestors, the knowledge of ghosts. And Orlando is really their own ancestor, living for 300 years—or thereabouts. And of course there's the question of what happens to Orlando's inheritance when they switch genders in England—before women could legally hold property. And with all the hateful anti-trans legislation getting trotted out today,

the ballast of the grave, which you mentioned before, is somehow in the mix, too, as a more threatening part of that palimpsest.

JN: A lot of it has to do with letting yourself be comfortable with non-knowledge. I don't say ignorance—I say non-knowledge—which is the potential of new knowledge. That's what I try to insist upon in my art: a kind of non-closure—so the work remains open. I never took on the approach of illustrating the story of *Orlando*. In fact, it's a very silly, crazy story—so I took full liberty of that and thought I could be as weird and wacky as I wanted to be without disrespecting Virginia Woolf or her work whatsoever. I wanted to work by standing on her shoulders and by taking Orlando to a different level—so that's what happened. After the first 2020 exhibition of that work in an exhibition called *Orlando et la tempête* (Orlando and the Tempest) at Galerie Richard in Paris, I began working on the sound for it. I wanted to have a *finissage*—a closing party—and play a new piece of noise music for it. Andrew Deutsch and I began passing audio files back and forth: reworking original 2006 *viral symphOny* tracks on which he had been one of the collaborators. He'd found some recorded material that we had thrown to the curb, and I said—again—let's save that dead material! Maybe that's new, juicy stuff—and it sure was. At the end of the day the COVID virus came back hard in Paris and I wasn't able to have a *finissage* party, but we had made this long piece of noise music that I titled *Orlando et la tempête viral symphOny redux suite*. It had its debut over the radio on Wave Farm Radio WGXC 90.7-FM. The publisher of Pentiments Records in Chicago, Guido Gamboa, heard it and contacted me by email. He said something like, "I heard your piece and I think it's marvelous; I'd like to publish it as a vinyl record." And I said, "Wow, thank you! My pleasure." But first he published a selected works compilation of my earlier noise collage pieces—which I had been doing since the early 80s—on cassette. That compilation is called *Selected Sound Works*. As this was developing I was already working hard on the Artaud piece, so we ended up with the double LP vinyl. Unfortunately, it took a long time to print the vinyl—it's like doing a book for MIT Press. But the LP, called *The Viral Tempest*—which contains the Orlando piece and the Artaud piece—was ultimately published in April 2022 and I did another art show on the Orlando theme called *Turning the Viral Tempest*, also at Galerie Richard in Paris.

I've had quite an exciting time recently because one of my major animations from the *Computer Virus Project II* called *Viral Venture* was included in an exhibition at the Quai Branly

Museum in Paris in a show called *Micro mondes* (Little Worlds). On that piece I collaborated with my musician friend Rhys Chatham. Rhys provided the soundtrack for *Viral Venture* from a piece of his for 100 electric guitars. And then a new book of my poetry called *Styling Sagaciousness* came out of punctum books—who published my first book of poetry *Destroyer of Naivetés*—as well as a book I wrote about a noise musician named Minóy called simply *Minóy*. *Destroyer of Naivetés* is about Eros and *Styling Sagaciousness* is about Thanatos.

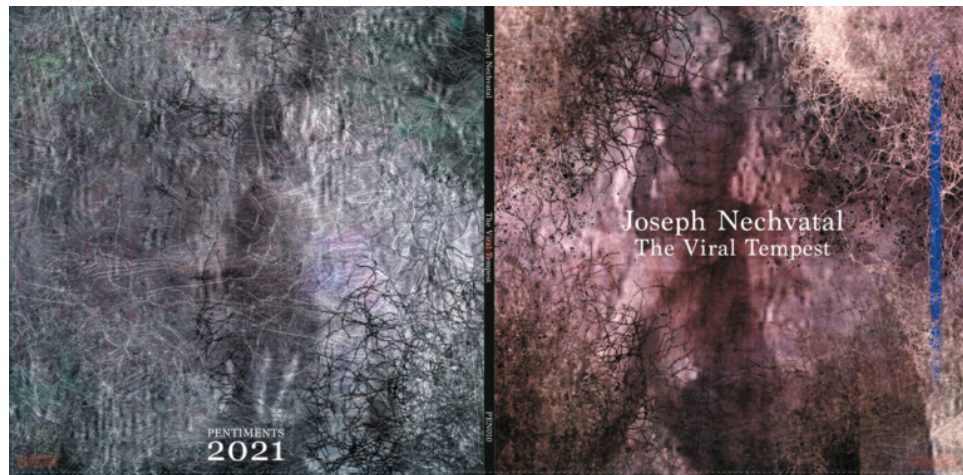


Figure 9. Open cover of *The Viral Tempest* LP

JE: You mentioned non-knowing and non-knowledge, and I'd like to ask you a couple of questions on that front. The first is a question prompted by my initial encounter with your work, which was listening to the digital audio files of your *Selected Sound Works* cassette; it begins with living systems and ends with COVID and death. I wanted to step back and think about the way your work inhabits the epistemic shift in media thinking, from the moment of noticing interference—static, noise—as irrefutable elements of so-called communicative technologies, to coming to recognize (and in many cases militarizing and monetizing) such interferences as living forms. Algorithmic viruses, missile control systems, Artificial Intelligence. Your 2011 book, *Immersion into Noise*, which was republished in 2021, proceeds along this juncture: it takes up artistic noise as a cultural strategy for interrogating—and I want to ask you about that word—contemporary immersion in new living, cognitive processes that are based on dynamic systems, connectionism, and situated emergence. Could you speak to this, especially from the vantage point of ten or twelve years? There's also the piece you wrote at the beginning of COVID about the Mathias Grünewald polyptych painting *Isenheim Altarpiece* at the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar for Hyperallergic—

*From Viruses to Algorithms, We Are Always Under Threat*—which was really about the stakes of this interrogation. The piece takes stock of what it means to live in and with these forms of life—not just blocking or interfering with what we might consider to be “normal” forms of communicability, but actually reconstituting what it means to be or not be alive.

JN: Let’s see. I’ll just jump in and see where it goes. By the way, the new second edition of *Immersion into Noise* has a new cover and a new preface. I’m really delighted in that because there were some pirating people that were trying to steal and resell the first edition, and it became very depressing. My wonderful publisher, Open Humanities Press, said “let’s just do a second edition and we’ll give it a new ISBN number.” So that’s what we did. For it I reread and reevaluated the whole book. I had a chance to change anything I wanted, but I changed almost nothing—except a few time-references. I threw out the first preface—which was quite long—and wrote a newer, shorter preface—but basically the bulk of the book still stands.

The premise is that we are living in a world of noise and it’s a question of how you feel about it. What you do with it in terms of art? Do you resist it? Or do you, like John Cage, acknowledge it as an incapability and incorporate noise into art—to make life more beautiful—more livable—more pleasurable, even? And what does that pleasure do to our moral psychology—how we look at the world—how we look at other people—how we look at the animal world—how we look at the invisible viral world? I know viruses have earned a bad rap—and rightfully so, now. I caught COVID myself, even with all my rigor and scrutiny and avoidance tactics. It seemed inescapable. It provided a greater realization of what *is* the world. In art, I think we must never forget the power of Luigi Russolo’s 1913 manifesto *The Art of Noises*. He just said it right out loud. Of course he was talking about mechanical noise, but his approach to the art of noise pertains now to the electronic world too. He said that we’re living in a world of noise and we should first of all recognize that fact and secondly do something good with it. And I just straight-on agree. This approach to noise, of course, leads to the artificial intelligence and artificial life application I developed for my art with my collaborator Stephane Sikora, who’s an expert C++ programmer in the a-life field. We were able to bring my first *Computer Virus Project I*, which began in 1992, into artificial life so I could see the virus live on the screen as it was happening in real time. I then could capture virus attacks and make paintings and animations—my virus became a much more useful tool for me as a painter. The sound application was a carry-on from that. We used the same



C++ algorithm to infect a little sound loop that I injected into the program and so we were able to create a lot of noise which was then massaged by me and Andrew Deutsch and others in the first movement of *viral symphOny* that I produced with IEA at Alfred University. Eventually *viral symphOny* grew and grew—and become an ongoing work that never seems to die. You must understand that for me all this concern with viruses began with the AIDS epidemic. That’s why I started *Computer Virus Project I* in 1992-93. In 1991 I had been invited to my first artist’s residency in France in a little town called Arbois, which is in Eastern Central part of France called the Jura, near the Swiss border. That’s where Louis Pasteur grew up and I was established there as the Louis Pasteur artist-in-resident. I was then put in contact with people at the Saline royale d’Arc-et-Senans, which is an architectural masterpiece by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, and brought together with a computer scientist there working in the region. But that was all because I was dealing with the impact of AIDS deaths and my own fear of having contracted the virus. I used to read a lot of Tibetan Buddhism, and one principle of it is that you don’t run away from your demons. You face down your demons. I took that as good advice when it came to AIDS, and that was the beginning of the *Computer Virus Project* adventure. Then came the relief that “no”, I didn’t have it.

Soon the internet came into being in the mid-90s, and then all of a sudden all kinds of stuff was “going viral”—memes and ideas went viral—and then terrorism joined the analogy. There were all kinds of viral metaphorical applications, before I knew it. But I never involved myself in the actual hacking of computer systems. I never wanted to lose track of the virus as an artistic and poetic tool. My art virus has always been self-contained—within my own computers. For me it’s an artistic form of expression.



Figure 10. *Selected Sound Works* (1981-2021). Cassette on Pentiments Records partial cover

JE: This is making me think of a question you pose yourself, which is: what can culture, writ large, learn from the exponential unleashing of viral codes as they circulate and duplicate between the surface of your cultural and physical world? You've mentioned the idea of confronting your demons—you mentioned non-knowledge as a kind of confrontation as well. You've talked about artistic expression, but there's also a way in which your art is very much a form of research, and I don't mean the mad scientist kind, where you unleash these demons and see what happens. Rather, it's a reckoning with this question, which is not a necropolitics but more like a thanopolitics—as you describe in your new book of poems. You have to think through and with death—and the end of things and the limits of one's own knowledge. You've spoken before about this question and it seems to be still very present in the work: what can you learn from confronting the unleashing of viral codes? It's not a purely academic question but one that is both scientific and spiritual. You've coined the terms *cybism* and *viractuality* as names for the spiritual and ethical undercurrent of this exploration.<sup>8</sup> I'm not sure if I'm overstating this point.

JN: Two things. Both of those points—the research and the portmanteau words *cybism* and the *viractual*—these are magical tools. This has to do with my background interest in positive magic—where you launch energy and will into the world. Magical tools have real-world consequences if used with the energy of intensity. Because that so-called real world is also the inner world. The goal of all my work is the *viractual*, in a way—thus scientific/spiritual—because it has to do with the power to reprogram our own psychological mechanism—our inner system—so that we're able to break through with noise the patterning of our conditioning. With noise we can create new rhizomatic patterns of becoming—through breakage. That is my goal—and the theoretical benefit of what I've been doing with writing, music, and art. It's a way to empower my audience—or viewer or the other person on the other side of the phone—or anybody outside of me—so to give them the opportunity to work with me conceptually in the creation of the work of art through their own powers of visualization. That is why I'm usually against clarity in art—because it takes away the poetic effort needed to create. In tribal cultures there usually is someone who can foresee within

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Rares Iordache, “About cybism, viractualism and Immersion into Noise: An Interview with Joseph Nechvatal.” *Net-Art*, February 12, 2012. <https://post.thing.net/node/3577>

chaos what's to come. One who looks into a field of chaos and finds meaning. It's been done throughout the world, through the entire history of the world—except for now. So fuck, for me the goal for my art is to re-engage those dead powers of visualization in each and every one of us. I hope my work can enliven that search for the power of play dormant within all of our imaginations through the use of visualization found within chaos. That power is what I'm hoping to attain politically with my art—and that is a magical project.



Figure 11. *fundament vOlupte* (2011)

JE: That was beautiful, and I'd love to follow it up by asking you for a slightly more polemical version of what you've just said. It strikes me how antithetical everything you've said is to the contemporary fascination with—but now, also, the growing fear of—AI and AI-generated art, especially as it comes to reproduce both figuration work (not to mention just about all forms of IP—that is, intellectual property) and the inflated NFT marketplace of contemporary art sales. This strikes me as the retrograde inversion of your own engagement with AI. Whereas you proceed from a figure, and then immerse yourself into this encounter with noise and chaos, AI art is retro-analytic, seeking to end up with a something approximating figuration or “content.” For the moment many of the results look a bit like bastardized Francis Bacons, and that's funny, but there's an increasing realization that this technology will likely cost most culture workers their jobs. How does this strike you?

JN: AI is a historical river that is overwhelming culture. It is basically the pop emphasis for everything to be popular and accessible. That's the opposite of my kind of noisy anti-pop—I won't say anti-popular—because I think the powers of art magic are within every person. There's nothing elitist about the powers of visualization whatsoever, and I certainly wasn't dropped out of a golden egg. The AI issue for art has more to do with going upstream when everything is going downstream into remix pop: as an act of resistance.

I'm not a technophile, nor am I technophobic. I'm more in the J.G. Ballard-Philip K. Dick-William Burroughs mode of expressing ambiguity—or a willingness to acknowledge both the negative and the positive results that come from technological innovation. What I'm more worried about with AI is the human heart. And just how evil people can be, and how easy it is to abuse any new technology. Imagine what hackers and hucksters using AI can do to us. That's what bothers me: the people. I really am worried about that—not to speak of what kinds of viral weapons can be created by AI and used in AI decided wars. Again, I hope AI cures cancer and does all the good things to help us live and learn, but I know the human element behind it just ain't that pretty. I am an AI optimist, but I'm no fool.

So I'm trying to offer an alternative to an AI world that is becoming more and more homogenized into a monoculture where everything is recognizable within pre-established cultural brands and knowledge logos. I'm deliberately swimming my art in the wrong AI direction: away from the harvesting of the recognizable. As I said it to you earlier—part of my work is image



creation, and the other half of it is image destruction. So I must be my own worst logo enemy from a certain AI point of view, right? I mean, is it a surprise that I'm not one of the richest artists in the so-called art market? Hardly. Making money is not really what I set out to do as a young artist, so it would be unreasonable at this point for the results of my work to be anything but what they are: which is that I am a respected underground artist. I have carved out my own original niche with AI and my art life is dope. I'm very pleased with it and I want to continue with my AI a-life research within the art world. I want to continue with what I'm doing with digital painting, animation, noise music, poetry and creative writing and theory. I'm full of energy and motivation and desires and lust, even.

Perhaps the lust for life has always been the main force for avant-garde artists. In that respect, I think I may be in a mini-tradition of avant-garde values. I know some people say the avant-garde is long dead—like Lazarus—and all that baloney. Yeah, sure it is if you think so—but dig it—values are never dead. They're either applied or not applied.

JE: And the people who say that the avant-garde is dead tend not to be thinking about the likes of La Monte Young or Cecil Taylor or Yoko Ono. There tends to be a restricted sense of what that ethos amounts to, right? Also, your ideas about survival and thriving within a certain framework bring us back to the two figures whom we more or less began with: Artaud, as a figure admired by others but who was profoundly devastated himself, not only by mental illness, but also by the treatments for it. And then you have Orlando who, albeit a fictional construct, is nevertheless a figure through whom we witness as possible some of the ways of being that were perhaps unavailable to Virginia Woolf herself—somebody who was out of the closet and in love and survived.

JN: Yes, Orlando was a metaphor for her relationship with her girlfriend, Vita Sackville-West.

JE: Exactly. The juxtaposition between these figures is very powerful, as a way of asking: do you really have to become a martyr to the experimental cause? Or is experimentation something you both can, and must, *live* through?

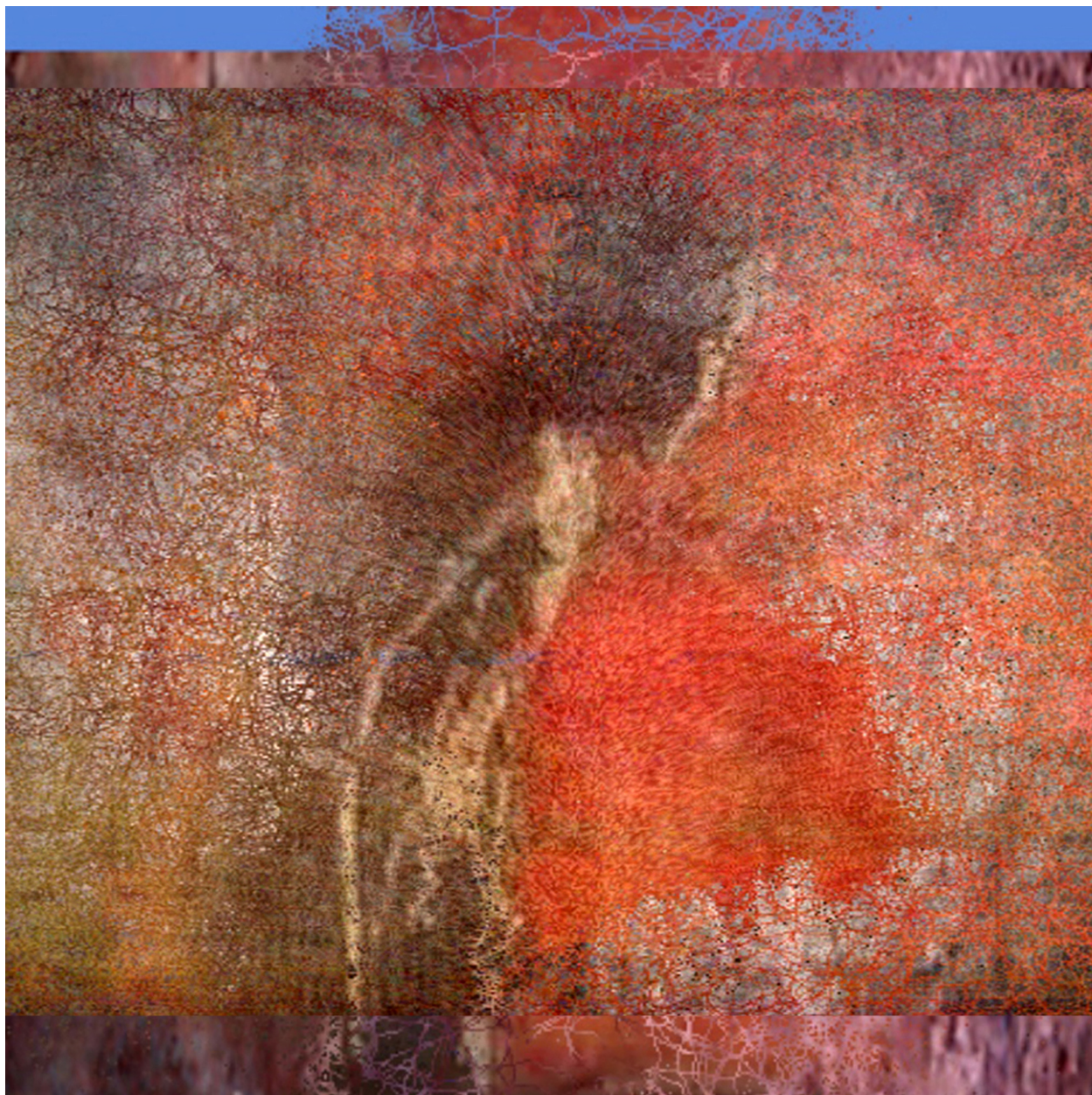


Figure 12. *Orlando Manifestation in Travesty* (2022)

JN: It's not a coincidence that the emotional feeling of the two records of the double LP present a lived in—and through—critical pleasure that deals with challenge. When you compare them, the *Orlando* piece is more twinkly; it's more tingly; it's lighter; it's effervescent at points. The Artaud piece, by contrast, is much grungier and expressionistic and harsh and hard and painful. You know, you take sacred art material, and you do with it what you think it deserves. Out of respect.

About becoming a martyr—no—I just want to be free and full of ecstatic joy and love. I want to be free to do whatever I can do with art to please myself while still respecting everyone.

I think freedom is still the name of the game of art—the whole point of being alive perhaps is being as free as possible within moral constraints. Of course there's no absolute freedom, but the illusion of freedom is very important—for if you choose to consider everything as preordained, then you're determined to live an unfree life. But if you can imagine that you're free—even at first as an imaginary construct—you can at least have that experience of feeling free within the non-freedom of reality as we know it. That freedom of thought and action is an important element of fine art within the liberal tradition.

JE: That's an impressive gloss on freedom: as predicated on a boundedness and perhaps even a responsibility to its parameters. Freedom is not a *carte blanche*, but a reckoning.

JN: That's right. You can't pretend limits don't exist; that's absolutely essential. But then there is the very real broadening of consciousness with openness. It is important that we continue to grow and learn and become, hopefully, wiser and more sensitive to other people. That we learn to love ourselves and love other people more and more.

I just want to say that it's very nice to talk to you Jonathan and hear your voice without looking through Zoom. I avoid Zoom like the plague because I don't look as good as I used to at my age—and it distracts the heck out of me looking at other people in their cluttered dens—particularly when I'm giving interviews. Here I am just looking up at the white ceiling in my bedroom, and I'm talking easily to you. I hear all the nuance of expression in your voice, even though it sounds like you're coming to me over a little car radio from 1967. I really hope we can meet someday and break bread.

JE: Let's make a point of this. Thank you.

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Joseph Nechvatal (born 1951 in Chicago) is an American artist now living in Paris who works with custom a-life virus-modeled software to make a-life paintings and art animations. He is also an art critic, theoretician/philosopher, poet and a noise music composer with a keen historical interest in experimental music. From 1978 to 1982 in New York City he archived the La Monte Young tape and Fluxus collection via the Dia Art Foundation. The paper book of his 1995 cyber-sex farce novella ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, even will be published by Orbis Tertius Press in 2023.

In 1992, when Nechvatal was artist-in-residence at the Louis Pasteur Atelier in Arbois and at the Saline royale d’Arc-et-Senans, he created computer virus codes that he used as an artistic tool for his *Computer Virus Project I*. This work was a reflection on his personal experiences of risk and loss with the AIDS epidemic. In 1995, at the urging of Pierre Restany, he moved to Paris and began splitting his time between Paris and New York. In 2002 he extended his viral experimentation into artificial life through a collaboration with the programmer Stephane Sikora in an ongoing work he calls the *Computer Virus Project II*—inspired by the a-life work of John Horton Conway (particularly his *Game of Life*), by the general cellular automata work of John von Neumann, by the genetic programming algorithms of John Koza, by the chance operation work of John Cage and Marcel Duchamp, and by the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger. The *Computer Virus Project II* includes computer-robotic assisted paintings, digital animations, and a lengthy audio composition entitled *viral symphOny*. Inclusive within the *Computer Virus Project II* series have been a series of virus-based themed exhibitions that explore the fragility and fluidity of the human body. His computer-robotic assisted a-life paintings are represented by Galerie Richard in Paris.

Nechvatal obtained his PhD in the philosophy of aesthetics and technology in the United Kingdom in 1999 at CAiiA-STAR, University of Wales, Newport under Roy Ascott—and produced the thesis *Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity Between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms*. His most well-known art theory book is *Immersion Into Noise*—first published by Open Humanities Press at the University of Michigan in 2011. In it, Nechvatal explores aspects of the aesthetics of the *art of noise* from the audio, spatial, cognitive and visual art perspectives. His book of essays *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* was published by Edgewise Press in 2009. Nechvatal has also published three books with Punctum

Press: *Minóy* (noise music—ed.—2014), *Destroyer of Naivetés* (poetry—2015) and *Styling Sagaciousness* (poetry—2022). From 1999 to 2013, Nechvatal taught *viractuality* (his portmanteau concerning that which combines the actual and the virtual) and immersion in the MFA department at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City.

Concerning his audio art work, Nechvatal's retrospective *Selected Sound Works* (1981-2021) was published at Pentiments in 2021 and his double vinyl LP of new work—*The Viral Tempest*—containing two long compositions—*Orlando et la tempete viral symphony redux suite* and *pour finir avec le jugement de dieu viral symphony plague*—was published by Pentiments in 2022. In the past Nechvatal has produced ambitious audio projects like *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine* (a *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine Special* aired in 2021 on dublab.com) as well as helping to establish the non-profit NYC cultural space ABC No Rio.

In 1984, Nechvatal created a No Wave opera called *XS* (1984-6) with the musical composer Rhys Chatham—that was featured in the No Wave exhibition *Who You Staring At?: Visual culture of the no wave scene in the 1970s and 1980s* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2023. A video documenting the Centre Pompidou March 8th event *XS: The Opera Opus: An Operatic Transvaluation of No Wave Aesthetics by Joseph Nechvatal and Rhys Chatham* has been published online at the Centre Pompidou website.

## Jonathan Eburne



Jonathan P. Eburne is founding coeditor, with Amy Elias, of the *ASAP/ Journal* and contributing editor of *ASAP/J*. He served as President of ASAP: The Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present in 2015. A Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and French and Francophone



Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, Eburne is the author, most recently, of *Outsider Theory: Intellectual Histories of Unorthodox Ideas* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), which received the James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association in 2020. His other published books include *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Cornell University Press, 2008) and four co-edited volumes of essays: *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde* (2017), *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons* (2017), *The Year's Work in the Oddball Archive* (2016), and *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic* (2013). He has also edited or co-edited special issues of the scholarly journals *Modern Fiction Studies*, *New Literary History*, *African American Review*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Criticism*, and *ASAP/Journal*. Eburne is founder and acting President of ISSS: The International Society for the Study of Surrealism and is series editor of the “Refiguring Modernism” book series at the Pennsylvania State University Press.